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SUBJECT: AMCIT PASTOR AND 17 HMONG DETAINED IN RELIGIOUS TRAINING CLASS IN HCMC

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: HCMC authorities on October 11 detained two Protestant pastors, one of whom was an American citizen, and 17 ethnic Hmong Protestant deacons from Northern Vietnam attending a Bible training class at a private house in HCMC. Police told the participants their meeting was illegal. The pastors were released the same day, though the AmCit was ordered to leave Vietnam by October 15 and informed that Vietnamese law prohibited him from teaching religion in Vietnam. The Hmong deacons were held overnight and then sent home to the northwestern provinces of Vietnam. ConGen DPO raised the case with an unapologetic Acting Pol-Econ chief of the HCMC External Relations Office, who observed that American citizens need to be aware of the rules governing religious practice in Vietnam. END SUMMARY.
2. (SBU) Pastor Doan Trung Tin (strictly protect), Director of the Vietnam Good News Mission -- a non-recognized Protestant evangelical organization -- notified us that, on October 11, 17 Hmong deacons from northwest Vietnam, a local HCMC pastor and an AmCit pastor of Laotian Hmong descent, were detained after the police broke up a religious training class in a private house in HCMC. The police also detained the owner of the home. , Pastor Tin said that his organization sponsored the training class, and claimed that he had held similar training sessions in HCMC for ethnic minorities in the past. This time, however, the police informed the participants that they were detained because the meeting was illegal. The two pastors and the owner of the house were released the same day, but the 17 Hmong remained in detention overnight before being returned to the Northwest highlands the following day.
3. (SBU) We met with the AmCit, Pastor Vang on October 13. Pastor Vang said That when he arrived at the private home on the morning of October 11, the police were already present. He said he was held at a police station until 7:00 p.m. and charged with failing to provide proper identification upon request -- his hotel retained his passport per standard practice in Vietnam -- and for engaging in activities inconsistent with his visa and his stated purpose of entry. Pastor Vang was ordered to report to the immigration police the following day. After nine hours in immigration police custody, Vang was ultimately charged with failing to provide proper identification, fined 500,000 Dong (USD 30), and told to leave Vietnam by October 15. Immigration police also confiscated his religious materials, camcorder and computer disks. According to Van, the immigration police informed him that it was against the law for a foreign missionary to teach religion in Vietnam.
4. (SBU) Pastor Vang said that this was his first trip to Vietnam. He told us that he had heard of training classes being organized for Hmong Protestants, and thought he could be of assistance because he is Hmong. Pastor Vang said that, prior to his travel, he had contacted the Vietnamese Embassy in the U.S. to inquire about religious issues in Vietnam, but was referred to the Vietnamese Embassy website. According to the pastor, the material there indicated that Vietnam allows religious freedom and freedom of assembly, with one document urging pastors to come to Vietnam themselves to witness the situation. Pastor Vang indicated to us that he was not handcuffed or mistreated while in custody, but he was visibly shaken by his detention. He asked several times if there was a higher Vietnamese authority that he could complain to about the incident involving the 17 Hmong. We recommended that he maintain a low profile for the remainder of his stay in Vietnam.
5. (SBU) DPO raised the detention of Pastor Vang and the 17 Hmong Vietnamese with Pham An, Acting Chief of the PolEcon unit of the HCMC External Relations Office on October 13. Noting the release of Pastor Vang, the DPO indicated that we trusted the Vietnamese authorities would continue to treat him in a professional manner. The DPO stressed that the situation of the 17 Hmong also was of concern and said we would appreciate an update on their status. The DPO stressed that it is important for local and national authorities to treat the 17 Hmong with care so as not to have their case spillover onto the broader debate of freedom of religion in Vietnam and its recent designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC).
6. (SBU) An observed that 17 Hmong meeting in a private residence in HCMC would "hardly be invisible" to local authorities. He suggested that the organizers had not sought permission to assemble and were intentionally creating a a provocation to trigger a GVN reaction that would in turn lead to an international

outcry. In general, Hmong issues were very sensitive, but particularly after CPC designation, all Vietnamese officials were "on alert," An added. . An urged that Americans better understand procedures that need to be followed for religious training and all gatherings in Vietnam.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: The Hmong incident is a reminder that even in relatively cosmopolitan HCMC, it is still all too easy for unauthorized religious groups -- particularly outsiders --to run afoul of local authorities and Vietnam's strict constraints on freedom of assembly. One silver lining is that our local colleagues understand that they are being watched closely on how they treat religious groups, recognized or not. In that regard An assured us that none of the 17 Hmong will be "detained whatsoever." Pastor Tin told us on October 18 that he had confirmation that at least one of the Hmong deacons had returned home, and he believed that the rest also had returned and were not facing retribution from local authorities.
END COMMENT.

WINNICK